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Analysis of Common Problems in Teaching of Piano Pedals

GAO Dengbin^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Music, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

In piano playing, incorrect actions such as non-standard pressing or bad timing of pressing and release in the use of right pedal often cause imperfect performance. There are also some casual and rough design concepts in the design of pedals. This article will carry out detailed and in-depth analysis of these problems.

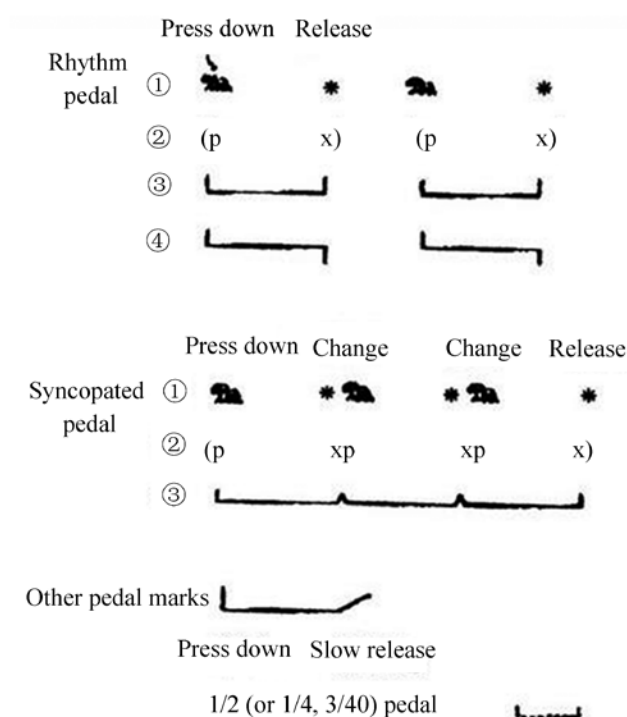
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INTRODUCTION

Today, the importance of pedals in piano playing has been widely recognized and the common piano pedal usage and general principles of the configuration are also familiar to everyone. However, unfortunately, in a large number of teaching activities, students' all kinds of errors from pressing pedals are still endless. Pedals not only do not add luster to the performance, but also add stains to the "soul of piano" (comments from a great pianist, Anton Rubinstein), becoming the culprit of poor performance. This paper will try to analyze common problems of the right pedal (also known as sustain or damper pedal) in piano playing.

Let's start with the marks of pedals. Common pedal marks are as follows:



In this paper, we take the most common mark, "Ped. *", as an example. In piano spectrums, "Ped." refers to press down the pedal; the symbol "*" refers to release the pedal back in place. In some places where continuous change of pedal is needed, only "Ped." press down mark is given and there is no "*" symbol for release. In fact, it actually means to finish two actions and that are to release first and then press down immediately at places with the mark "Ped.". The Right pedal is controlled by the right foot. The action looks very simple, nothing less than to step down and release, but we need to standardize these actions. Common problems are: The foot is at the wrong place on the pedal and it is often put too far or too

close to the pedal. When it is too close, the foot is hook up and the angle has been large and it is not easy to lift, often leading to incomplete stepping of the pedal. When it is too far, only toes are used to press down the pedal. That is not only tiring, but also makes it difficult to control the depth of the pedal. Sometimes players' foot is put at the wrong angle of the pedal, showing a toe in or toe out. This will affect the flexibility of the ankle; some players even lift their heel off the ground, the whole leg lifted while pressing down the pedal. The sound of the heel stomp will affect the audience to listen to music. It doesn't meet the requirement of high flexibility of the ankle when the player frequently changes the pedal. The correct method should be placing the foot at the position where the biggest pressure point sits at the thickest part of the sole nearest to the toes and the foot points directly to the pedal. The heel is always not to leave the ground. With the ankle as the main active joint, the forefoot press down the pedal and release the pedal.

Next we will discuss the focus of this paper: common problems in the use of the right pedal. The author is going to elaborate them from the following three aspects: press down, release and change.

1. PROBLEMS ON "PRESSING"

1.1 The timing for "Pressing" the Pedal

Accurate pedal marks are usually aimed at a note. In addition to preparing for the pedal (pressing it before playing the note), the timing for pressing down the pedal is either the same with the sound or to follow the sound. That is the so-called pressing down the pedal after the sound. Common errors include:

(a) Early pressing: This will press down early to void the previous note. Even when we are playing legato and when want to press down at the extended sound, it is very likely that we might press down the pedal with the end of the previous note.

(b) Late pressing: When we press down the pedal at short low pitches, if we don't press down the pedal before the fingers leave the keys, the short low pitches can't be extended. This is very common when we change the pedal on low pitches. For example, in the first paragraph of *Fantaisie-Improvisation* by Chopin, the pedal is usually released first and then pressed down the first note of the first time or the third time. If the pedal isn't pressed in time, the bass line will be changed.

1.2 The Depth of Pressing

There are more concerns about issues on the depth of pressing. There are full pedal, half pedal and quarter pedal and so on. There might be other different levels. These different pedal pressing ways need to be considered with the following issues:

(a) Whether the depth fits the style of the work. With the same pedal mark, playing Mozart's works must be different from playing Beethoven's works. Under normal circumstances, if we press down full pedal in Mozart's decomposition and chord-style melody, the effect is too brilliant and is not appropriate. However, for a piece of work like the end of Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata third movement, there are more than four octaves rolling up and down for decomposition of the chord. It is magnificent and unstoppable. In this piece of work, pedal press cannot be too shallow. Players should press down fully pedals to get the most resonant sound effects. For Bach's works, some music tends to show the characteristics of organs, and some music is inclined to the characteristics of the harpsichord. When we play these two different styles of works, the depth of the pedal certainly is not the same. Like the primer of *Toccata and Fugue in D minor*, pedal not only needs to be boldly used, but also pressed full in order to obtain a solemn, three-dimensional effect.

(b) Whether the depth fits the sound effects of the current sound range. The depth of the pedal should be appropriate to the current sound range. When it is mainly at the high pitch range, you can press down the pedal deeper; when it is most in the low pitch range, the pedal should be pressed down shallowly. Such as in Moshkovsky Etudes Op72 No. 11, both the first and last paragraphs are played by the right hand at high pitch range with the pentatonic scale. In several consecutive down modes, they are all three times with a pedal. Players can engage the pedal deeply. In the middle, the right hand is much for long chords and the left hand is in the low-pitched range with a small amount of decomposition of foreign chords. Here if you do not use the pedal, the right hand lines and the overall atmosphere are not long enough; if you engage fully pedals, it is bound to be muddy. Therefore, here we should change the pedal every three times and pressing down one-third or even a quarter of the pedal would be enough.

(c) Whether the depth fits the texture characteristics. With Chopin Etudes Op25, for No.1 and No.2, the pedal depth should be different. In No.1, both hands are for big decomposition of the chord; in No.2, the left hand although is for the decomposition of chords, the right hand has light drifts mixed with a lot of sounds. Therefore, it is ideal if we press down the pedal in full in the former one and press down the pedal in half or even more shallowly in the latter one. It is not desirable if we don't differentiate the pedal use of the two Etudes or even in an opposite way to press down the pedal.

2. PROBLEMS ON "RELEASE"

2.1 The Timing of "Release"

Early release often happens and it will cause the following consequences:

(a) It will release the support for low pitches. Such as in the first section of Chopin's *Brilliant Variations*, with the pedal press down with the left hand's octave bass B down, we must wait until the third time down to release the pedal. However, some players often release the pedal or change the pedal on the chord at the second time, which makes down B major chord lose the support of root sound in the low pitch range and the sound effect of the second time becomes the translocation effect of three-tone as the bass.

(b) It weakens the lyricism. As in Chopin's *Nocturne in E Flat Major* Op.9-2, the right hand melody line has long breath while the left hand's accompaniment uses three-beat rhythm type. If we release the pedal at the second or third time, it will weaken the lyricism, so that a sense of rhythm will be strengthened and it will give the feeling of a waltz.

Late release also happens. Simply speaking, it will make the previous note and the upcoming note overlaps. In specific works, late release will often weaken the intensity and dance nature. As in waltzes, for works with particularly strong style of dance, there are two ways of using the pedal: Press down the pedal at the first beat and then release it at the second beat; or engage the pedal at the first beat and then release at the third beat. The former is more commonly used. If we engage the pedal after the note changed at the first beat of the next third beat, the first beat will lose the intensity of stress and the entire waltz will become lifeless.

2.2 The Speed of "Release"

Even if the pedal can be timely released, the speed of the release still has a great impact on the musical sentiments. The general rule is: quick release for strong beats and slow release for weak beats. Such as for the chord at the end of Liszt's *Rigoletto*, players should keep strong in the heart and quick release the pedal at the final strong beat. However, we need a weak release when practicing the chord at the end of Liszt's *Sigh* and the pedal should be slowly released as the disappearing of the sound. If pianists don't carefully differentiate the two ways, their feet won't help them in performances.

3. PROBLEMS ON "CHANGING"

Full pedal all the time and frequent change of the pedal. The former is a common problem for pianists who don't use their ears to carefully listen while the latter is a common symptom for those who don't care about any rules and just pursue the so-called "cleanness". We need to avoid these two extremes. We should have the concept of harmony for the arrangement of the pedal. In general, the change of the pedal should be under the principle of harmonic change and we should also fully consider the melody factors. Different harmony is better not be arranged in the same pedal. For the same harmony, if the

rhythm-type repeats, we also need to change the pedal. Such as in Chopin Etudes Op10-12, before "revolution" theme appears, the left hand rolls up and down and this type of sound comes twice in a section with the same chord, but we must release the pedal twice on the bass. In verse 29 of the first verse of g minor, it is a typical example of changing the pedal in the same harmony because of the melody. Here left hand octave bass keeps in a section; the right hand plays two voice parts—melody and the middle layer of harmony. Harmony section does not move, but the melody is continuous for two degrees. At this time, if we don't change the pedal within a harmony, the sound effect will be very vague. Therefore, here it requires that the left hand does not move and we change the pedal with the change of each note following the right hand's melody.

These are the common technical problems in the use of pedals, but the worst problem I think is our concept. The first problem is not to design pedals and to believe that pedals are very rough and very vague things. Designers do not think in depth combining with works for fine designs. Although for the same work, the design of pedals will have some differences because the pianos and playing venues are different, as the "soul" of piano playing, the general idea of pedal design should be much the same. Take Debussy's *Moonlight* as an example. Even in a place where the resonance effect is particularly good, we cannot change the use of the pedal completely into the design used in Mozart's sonata. A common adjustment may be the depth of the pedal or the frequency of the change and so on. Those who completely depend on their not very reliable ears to adjust the pedal, or simply engage full pedal all the time until they feel it's clean should be resolutely avoided. Especially when the player's control ability and musical accomplishment have not yet reached a considerable level, the damage of such arbitrary performance to music is self-evident. The second mistake is that players may think of not using the pedal in the practice process and they will add pedal until the hands are fully skilled. Sometimes, in order to overcome problems in the practice of fingers or some other problems, we need to practice without the pedal, but for most music, especially Romance and subsequent works, at the beginning of practice, players should use the pedal. Only in special parts or a small number of times they may practice without a pedal. In this way, they can always establish a clear sound effect goal and progress straight forward toward the target. This also allows the foot and hands to establish a good relationship of cooperation from the beginning. It's just like making an herb stew. Only when all herbs are stewed together with the main ingredient at the beginning can the stew be fully taste and have the expected function. If we add the herbs when the main ingredient is done, the medical function of the herbs can't really be demonstrated in the stew soup.

In vast piano works, only when we adhere to the music score analysis as the theoretical basis with the supervision of “musical” ears and with reference to the style of works, relying on the flexible ankle can we always grasp the soul of works and have hands and foot work together to jointly create the magnificent audio world and reveal the rich connotation of the works.

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